



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Using assessed blogs to enhance student engagement

Citation for published version:

Christie, H & Morris, N 2019, 'Using assessed blogs to enhance student engagement', *Teaching in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2019.1662390>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/13562517.2019.1662390](https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2019.1662390)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Teaching in Higher Education

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Hazel Christie* and Nina Morris^

*Corresponding author. The University of Edinburgh, Institute for Academic Development,

1 Morgan Lane, EDINBURGH, EH8 8PF hazel.christie@ed.ac.uk

^ The University of Edinburgh, School of Geosciences, Drummond Street, EDINBURGH, EH8

9XP, n.morris@ed.ac.uk

Teaching in Higher Education

Using assessed blogs to enhance student engagement.

Abstract

In this paper, we investigate the powerful role of blogging to promote student engagement. We use the experience of students on four courses at one university, which all included blogging in their assessment portfolio. The paper draws on focus groups undertaken with the students participating in the courses to provide a detailed examination of how and why blogging fosters engagement. We show how a focus on assessment practices, including blogging, is an important addition to the literature on student engagement. In the empirical section, we present detailed findings from the student interviews, including discussion of how blogging enables students to develop their own voices as part of the writing process. The evidence suggests that a broader understanding of student engagement depends not only on the complex interaction between students and assessment practices, but on understanding the role of students' investment in the learning process.

Key words

Assessment; blogging; student engagement; student learning.

Introduction

Recent debates on learning and teaching in higher education have focused on how to foster greater levels of student engagement (Biggs and Tang 2011). Curriculum (re)design, including changes to assessment practices, has been subject to particular scrutiny (Carless 2015). Increasingly, emphasis is placed on how teachers strive to create as 'rich a learning environment as possible for students' (Falchikov 2005: 153), where they are supported in their own efforts to learn. To enable this involvement, Serafini (2000) argues for a shift towards enquiry-based assessment where students become involved in the learning process through a wide variety of assessment devices and methods. This study focuses on students' perceptions of the affordances and challenges of blogs, as an example of one such assessment practice. Students' reflections on assessment practices have gained importance in recent years, most notably in the research literature on how best to promote more engaged student learners (Trowler 2010). In order to support engagement, educators must rethink assessment practices to include a more diverse set of activities than simply relying on examinations and essays. Blogging is one example of an innovative form of assessment. Our focus on this paper is on using students' perspectives on blogging to investigate the link between engagement and assessment strategies.

Enhancing student engagement

The current interest in student engagement is part of a wider trend to understand the drivers of student success in higher education (Biggs and Tang 2011), and has become 'ubiquitous in mainstream discourses concerning higher education' (Gourlay 2015: 402). In discussing this ubiquity this section looks to the broad literature on engagement before focusing on the links between assessment strategies and student engagement. It also looks to research that focuses on the links between active learning and student engagement both of which are important to understanding how new forms of assessment, including blogging, can be used to promote engagement.

One widely cited definition of engagement is by Trowler (2010: 3) who sees it as 'the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions', which is 'intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution'. Student engagement is thus a construct that captures a range of institutional practices and student behaviours related to satisfaction and achievement, including academic integration, teaching practices and curriculum design.

How students engage with their studies and what they, and their institutions, can do to improve engagement has been well researched (Kuh 2009; Zepke and Leach 2010). Some researchers focus on students themselves, such as Rust, O'Donovan and Price (2003), who argue that engagement requires students to become active participants in their own learning. Others note the role of individual agency and motivation as factors in engagement (Forrest, Judd and Davison 2012; Klemencic 2017; Ni Raghallaigh and Cunliffe 2013), or employ socio-material analyses to explore the practices through which students engage with course materials to create meaningful, and hence engaging, learning experiences (Gourlay 2015). Others highlight the role of institutions through pedagogical issues such as curriculum design (Holmes 2018; Almarghani and Mijatovic 2017) and via the kinds of learning and teaching regimes in which educators operate (Trowler 2008). Often the emphasis is on the first year of the university curriculum (Bovill, Bulley and Morss 2011; Everett 2015), indicating the links between student engagement and increased retention rates (Kuh *et al* 2007).

A concern in the literature is with the relationship between student engagement and assessment strategies. This is allied to wider debates about assessment outcomes and successful learning, with a focus on investigating the impact of summative assessment on student learning. This is not straightforward. Foster, McNeil and Lawther (2012), for example, argue that, while assessment and feedback can help students to engage in their learning, this is not an automatic outcome. Rather, there is a critical role for teachers, administrators, academic developers and university leaders to ensure that this link is built for their students. This begins from the assessment practices and their effect on how students become self-regulated learners (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006) who are motivated by the grades received for assessed work (Rust 2002). Assessment becomes the central driver in supporting learning (Taras 2008) and attention focuses on how the design and development of an assessment strategy might be used to encourage increased motivation and engagement with a course.

Holmes (2015, 2018) indicates that the approach a student takes to learning will depend on the assessment task. In her research, a low stakes continuous weekly e-assessment had a positive influence on student engagement, with students attributing this to the continuous nature of the assessment process. Studies have looked to the impact of multiple-choice questions to understand how these can help to increase student engagement. While there is some debate about the link between multiple-choice questions and deep learning (Jordan 2009), investigations undertaken amongst nursing students found that testing of higher level skills, such as critical thinking, can be

fostered using multiple-choice questions which are well-designed (Brady 2005; Leung, Mok and Wong 2008).

Another strand in the research on student engagement focuses on active learning. Of central concern here is the active engagement that students demonstrate in or out of class including their participation in group work, public interactions with staff and their use of the Virtual Learning Environment (Holmes 2018). While these are valuable additions to our understandings of how students engage, Gourlay (2015 pp.403) highlights how the emphasis on participation may overlook the private, quiet and contemplative practices that may also be powerful indicators of student engagement. A focus on assessment is crucial here to call attention to the practices that are non-verbal and non-observable, but which contribute enormously to student engagement with a course.

Here we investigate an innovative form of assessment, namely blogging, as a way to encourage students to become engaged learners. While there is a burgeoning literature on blogging, much of it concentrates on the benefits that accrue to students including the development of reflective reading and writing skills (Kidwell *et al* 2012). Attention has also focused on the extent to which blogging can be used to motivate students to think independently and assume responsibility for their own learning (Hansen 2015; Park 2003; Smith 2010). A further strand concentrates on cognitive and personal benefits of blogging including the extent to which it can improve students' writing and communication skills and accommodates a diverse set of learning strategies (Cook 2000; Hansen 2015; Smith 2010). Allied to this is a concern with the extent to which blogging can increase the level of 'realness' or authenticity of the learning tasks which increases students' motivation and so supports deeper learning (Pursel and Xie 2014).

Blogging, of course, like all kinds of assessments, brings with it a set of expectations and demands of students. One concern is the potential of novel forms of assessment to increase the levels of stress experienced by students or to change the nature of the power dynamics inherent in the assessment process (Carless 2006). Increasingly, recognition is being given to the links between students' approaches to learning, their experienced emotions and the outcomes of their learning (Trigwell, Ellis and Han 2012), as well as to their emotional responses to feedback (Shields 2015). As such, it is important to attend to the potential of blogging to raise new kinds of questions about the emotional dynamics of assessments as well as to how it makes students feel about their engagement with the course.

Method

The material presented in this paper draws on a project investigating the use of blogs at the University of Edinburgh. The project received ethical clearance from the School of Geosciences, where the Principal Investigator (PI) was based. Following a university-wide survey of Course Organisers (CO) 17 courses were identified which used blogs as a form of assessment. From these, four courses were chosen to represent the breadth of disciplines, blog formats, VLEs, and class sizes found in the sample (Table 1). The students ranged from second years through to fifth years. The different stages at which the students were at did not feature as a factor in the research process. For three of the courses there was no prior educational contact with the students. One of the courses was taught by the PI, and this required additional ethical consideration. Every effort was made to separate the research process from the day-to-day teaching of the course. Students were reassured that participation was voluntary, anonymous, not linked to successful completion of the course, and that the data gathered would not be analysed until after they had completed all of assessments, including the blogging tasks.

A range of methods was used to gain insight into the case studies. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the course organisers (n=6), and four focus groups (FG) were used to gather data from the students (n=16) taking the courses in 2016-17. The courses chosen were small, with between 10 and 50 students in each. The aim was to recruit a maximum of five students from each course to generate enough data to say something meaningful about the cohort as a whole. No attempt was made to vary the number of students in each focus group because their purpose was to highlight themes across the respondents as a whole and not to discern disciplinary or course differences, or to try to address issues about the validity of quantitative data.

Students were recruited by the research assistant. He attended a class for each of the courses, introduced the project and asked students to participate. He conducted the FGs which were semi-structured, lasted 40-60 minutes, and covered students' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of blogging, and their experiences of being assessed in this way. FGs were recorded and transcribed in full before being uploaded for analysis using NVivo software.

The constant comparative method was used in our analysis of the transcripts (Braun and Clarke 2006). We gave each data item equal attention in the coding process, and checked the themes against one other and back to the original data set. In looking at themes, we referred to both an entire section

and also to the remainder of the transcript to ensure that any extracts used were consistent with views expressed on other topics. This process ensured that the analysis gave a holistic picture of individual variables. Particular attention was paid to the course where the PI was the CO in case her contact with the students could have affected the data collected. For example, the students who participated might have been those who enjoyed blogging, liked the course, or wanted to impress the PI/CO. In analysing the data every effort has been made to identify the themes which were important across the courses as a whole and not unduly driven by the (often positive) insights shared by the students on the PI's course. The quotations selected for this paper represented significant constructs that appeared across the range of students.

Each student has been allocated an identifying number which is used to attribute quotes to individuals. Thus, for example, Geol R1 indicates the first respondent from the Geology focus group. The details of the students' experiences are used to illuminate the extent to which blogging enhanced student engagement, including the power of blogging to engage them in the learning process, as well as to allow them to personalise their learning. These narratives provide a more nuanced account than is currently available of the extent to which student engagement is fostered through innovative assessment methods.

Case study	Subject	Course type	VLE	Blog	Other assessment
1	Human Geography	Optional Year 3/4	LEARN	Independent Private 40%	3,000-word essay 60%
2	Geology	Compulsory Year 5	PebblePad	Independent Private 30%	Technical report 70%
3	Law	Optional Year 3	LEARN	Individual Visible to peers 40%	Group presentation 60%
4	Veterinary Medicine	Optional Year 2	WordPress	Group Private 100%	N/A

Table 1. The case study courses

Using blogging to enhance student engagement

Using the data from the FGs we draw attention to three ways in which blogging enabled students to become more engaged learners. First, to the structure of the blog which allowed them to engage consistently with the course materials. Secondly, through its difference to conventional assessments and the opportunities this afforded the students to take a more creative approach. Finally, we look at the difficulties of blogging and show how students often turned these to their own advantage and, as a result, increased their engagement levels.

1. Engaging students through the blogs' structure

A common theme was for students to describe a feeling of engagement with the course and to have a sense of how this had had an impact on their learning. This stemmed from the structure of the blogs where they were required to write a series of entries over the course of the semester. This forced them into engaging with more material, across the length of the course, than they might have done with an essay or examination. As one student stated:

I guess the way they were set out in five, they allowed you to reflect on each lecture, which I probably wouldn't have done if I didn't have to write a blog' (Geog R4).

Taking responsibility for their blogging was an important issue for the students and they appreciated how its continuous nature kept them fully engaged with the course. This involved them in approaching classes in much more engaged ways because they were required to blog about them afterwards. This, they felt, 'tricked you into enjoying lectures', and hence rendered them more meaningful. One commented:

The sessions we went to we had to [...] pay attention in a different way, to the lecturer. [...] you felt like you were taking something away from it, rather than just regurgitating it, like, an exam question, and being asked to write about it. You actually remembered it, because you were paying attention to something a bit more exciting (Geol R3).

In Law, the blogs were based around seminar discussions that relied on students having done set readings. One student outlined how this process enabled everyone to participate more fully in the learning activities:

What I thought [...] was good about it was that every class there was a discussion. Whereas any other classes, you don't get that. You maybe get one or two topics where everyone really gets into it, especially the ones where the essay comes out and then you get the seminar after it. And no one comes because everyone's like [...] I'm not going to do an essay on this, I'm not getting examined on this class; what is the point? Whereas every single class we were basically getting examined on. So every single class people wanted to join in and learn from it (Law R4).

What was clear across the data was that making a number of blog entries encouraged the students to engage more often, and more deeply, with a range of learning activities.

2. *Engaging students through creative and personalised assessment processes*

In documenting the importance of blogging as a novel assessment method, the students referred to the opportunities it afforded them to be more creative in approaching their assessments. One commented:

when I write an essay I always want to emphasise a point by putting it in bold, or emphasise one word by putting it in italics, and I could do that in the blog, and that's fun, because you finally do things that you've always wanted to do in an essay but you never really thought you could justify it. So I was like oh, exclamation point, or bold, and underlined. So that was fun (Geog R1).

The design of the blog was an important part of this and contributed to the sense of blogging as being 'creative' and 'fun'. The impact of designing the blog, however, was about more than just its visual appeal. It allowed them to bring their emotions and passion into their work:

Using [an] exclamation point, it's so freeing. Really. I really liked adding the media stuff. I just thought it was fun. [...] So I think adding the media and the videos or the pictures or the fonts

really does get across, like what you said, more of your personality and more 'this is who I am, this is what I want you to know about what I'm trying to say to you'. (Geog R2).

They often contrasted the blog format to the rigidity and standardisation of conventional essays and described the freedom of writing in an engaging fashion:

Doing [...] the pictures and the font and colour and stuff, [...] I really enjoyed that [...] having your own personality and individuality attached to an assessment. Whereas essays are standardised font and layout and everything, [...] university assessments feel like they just want everyone to be the same. [...] something like this, it allows you a different way of expressing thoughts and your perspective (Geog R4).

The students enjoyed the process of blogging, which in itself is a crucial step in enhancing engagement:

I just quite really enjoyed blogging. It was different. Even though at times it seemed like a lot of work it was still really enjoyable (Law R3).

This enjoyment brought clear benefits for student engagement. One commented:

it renders something that's so hard-core academic into something you can relate to. And if you can relate to it that means you can learn it better, if you can learn it better it means you can perform your best (Geog R1).

This enthusiasm carried over into their personal lives to the kinds of conversations they had with peers which, again, furthered engagement with the course materials. They commented:

I think it's one of the first times I've felt fully engaged with a course, [...] I talked about it with people. [...] I've literally never done that. Even if I've enjoyed a course, I've never fully felt... [...] like it's impacted the way I think fully. And I think the blogs definitely have helped that (Geog R2).

But with this one it's like every week I get home and I talk to people about oh, this week, this is a topic, what do you think? And we have arguments (Law R2).

Their accounts revealed how an emphasis on learning-orientated assessment (Carless 2015) afforded them the opportunity to experience a very different assessment process that was creative and enjoyable, and which they felt enhanced their engagement.

Another feature of the blogs was the opportunities they brought for personalisation of learning. As indicated above, students perceived essays as standardised models of assessment that forced them into a series of restrictive practices. In contrast the blogs were liberating and gave them the freedom to express their own personalities. In part this came from the opportunity to choose the topic to blog on, and the perspective that they would then adopt. They expressed relief that they had ‘the freedom finally, to express themselves’. One commented:

what was good about the blogs is everyone could work with what really tickled their fancy [...]. So different things excited different people and you got more into it depending on what reading you did. (Law R4)

Students also benefited from the ‘flexibility to pick and choose what you think is interesting’. In this way the opportunity to tailor the topics to their own interests allowed the students to engage with their course in a much more personal way:

It was good to put in your personal reflections, whereas essays don't tend to do that so much. So that was fun and exciting, and it gets you to engage with the course in that personal level (Geog R1).

For others it was the first time that they could integrate thoughts from their personal lives into an academic assessment, thus enhancing the authenticity of the assessment process. One student captured the excitement of this:

So as this course relates to so many things that we're personally engaged with, I'd just be walking around and be like ‘oh, I could write my blog on this, I could write my blog on that, oh, oh’ (Geog R1).

With the freedom to design the blog to their own specification, and the considerable choice in the content, students felt they had the opportunity to find their own voice. Indeed, some commented that it had been the first time they had been ‘asked to give an opinion on a lecture’ and that the

process of identifying their voice in the style of the blog had been a key moment in their undergraduate career.

3. Engaging students by turning difficulties into learning moments

A final theme from the focus groups was the students' accounts of the difficulties of blogging. Students, however, often turned these struggles to their advantage, seeing acquiring new skills as a key learning moment and again, furthering their engagement with the course.

One difficulty related to the use of unfamiliar software packages and/or technology. Many described the VLEs as 'not very intuitive' or 'not user friendly'. This, coupled with uncertainties about how to write a blog, led to students struggling in the first instance:

The formatting thing was a disaster [...] my font kept going ... I would put it all in one font and then save it, and then go back to it two days later and it just turned into a different font of its own. [...] I found that really an annoying part of the blogs (Geog R1).

Some worked it out for themselves:

It took me, I don't know, like, two days, to figure out why my reference list wouldn't save in the blog, but then I found out that it's only because I was copying it from a PDF file (Geol R2).

Others illustrated how individuals would support their peers by sharing information:

There was a lot of common frustration, in trying to help each other. [...] For example, someone figured out how to put figures in, and then shared that wisdom with everyone (Geol R1).

The Vets were typical in being concerned about the extent to which they should make their blogs multi-modal. From initial disquiet they worked backwards from the grade-related marking criteria for the course and used these as a guide to designing their blogs. They thus developed solutions to their problems:

we got given the marking sheets for what we'd be marked on, which was quite useful; [...] ...one of the points on the marking sheet was appropriate use of media, so we knew we had to put some sort of media in it (Vet R1).

The marking criteria further helped students to gauge how best to write a blog that would gain a good mark:

the only specific thing was it must be between this number and this number of words, and you should have between eight and 20 reference [...]. And then the rest was things like appropriate use of media and appropriate language, and good, well proofread, [...] it was quite well laid out exactly how many marks we can get (Vet R1).

Another challenge for students who were used to 'churning out essays' (Geol R3) to set deadlines was the need to blog regularly over the duration of the course. Again, they turned this pressure to an advantage as they sought to adapt to the demands of writing regularly and in a different format:

the hardest thing about it all was just because it was so new. I'd never done a blog before [...] So whereas when we're do an essay obviously [...] we all know how to write an essay very easily. Whereas a blog was just like completely alien. But then I think that was also good because it's something completely new which is exciting as well as it is a challenge (Law R4).

Overall, then, student engagement was enhanced through a range of problems which actually were 'more of an advantage than a disadvantage' precisely because the students turned them, consciously or not, into learning moments. The evidence presented here points to the capacity of students to become active agents of their own engagement in situations where they might feel an initial annoyance about some aspects of an unfamiliar method of assessment.

Discussion

The study found that the inclusion of a blog in four case study courses increased student engagement. The students reflected that they engaged more with the lectures and the course materials than they did when they were assessed using more conventional methods, and that the assessment was more meaningful and relevant for them. This supports the theory that students' approaches to learning are

shaped by assessment (Foster, McNeil and Lawther, 2012) and that students are motivated by assessment. The structured nature of the blog posts gave the students the opportunity to reflect on their course materials at regular intervals and to build up a portfolio of their learning. As others have observed, course design drives the nature of the ways in which students engage with course materials (Biggs and Tang 2011). This design was built in to the structure of the courses by the COs and here this was achieved by setting up blogging tasks on a week by week, or block by block, basis. The continuous nature of this type of assessment is key to supporting the students' learning (Holmes 2015), and their engagement with the course, and is an example of what Rust (2002) and Carless (2015) describe as a learner-centred assessment practice.

Although we did not examine the learning preferences or strategies of the students the findings suggest that the use of the blogs encouraged a self-perceived deeper understanding of the content, adding to debates about the links between assessment strategies and learning preferences (Gibjels and Dochy 2006; Smith and Miller 2005). What emerged from the study was the significance of the students' ability to make connections across the course as a whole, which they linked to the continuous nature of the blogging tasks. They felt they engaged with more of the taught content, with more of the learning resources, and understood more of the connections across the course, all of which contributed to them learning in a deeper way. Further, they used the blog as a springboard from which to make connections between real world issues, including their personal experiences, and the course content. Feeling personally invested in the assessment process contributed to their deeper engagement with the course content in ways that have not been captured in debates about authentic learning which tend to focus on the design of real world learning experiences rather than on what the students bring to the assessment process (see, for example, Herrington and Herrington 2006). What is clear from this study, however, and which confirms existing work on authentic learning environments, is that the more authentic the tasks and activities, the more the students are engaged, the more they learn and the more they retain (Samball, McDowell and Montgomery 2012).

How students participate in their studies has become an important question in debates about student engagement with attention focusing on both institutional practices and the students' own motivation and persistence. Much of this research focuses on the creation of meaningful, and hence engaging learning experiences, in which students have the opportunity to express themselves, as well as to learn from peers. While this is an important contribution to debates about participation and engagement it tends to focus on the visible aspects of participation such as speaking in class, engaging in small group discussions or contributing to on-line fora (Gourlay 2015). Our study adds to these

debates by highlighting the silent, thoughtful, contemplative work that students undertake on their own, often outside of class, to meet an assessment brief. What was clear from the study was that blogging encouraged them to engage in the kind of quiet, private work that is more commonly associated with preparing for essays and exams. This preparation is often stressful and anxiety-inducing, especially when tied to high stakes assessment (Robothom and Julian 2006). Here, however, the students described altogether different emotions in their approach to the assessment process, characterising blogging as fun, exciting and even as something that they found enjoyable and looked forward to doing. This is an important addition to emerging debates about the links between learning preferences, assessment strategies and experienced emotions (Trigwell, Ellis and Han 2012).

Continuous assessment has been found to be a popular type of assessment amongst students (Furnham, Batey and Martin 2011) and this study begins to unpack some of the reasons behind this. As we have already indicated, some of this stems from the continuous nature of the tasks and the opportunity to build connections across the course, as well as to the enjoyment the students got from blogging. This sense of enjoyment is an important addition to debates about student engagement and continuous assessment. The students were clear that blogging was a pleasurable activity that stimulated their learning in new and exciting ways. It was the first time they had been asked to give their own opinion on a topic or to draw on their own experiences as part of the assessment process. The students frequently stated that the blogs were much more creative and, indeed, liberating, compared to more traditional assessment methods, all of which contributed to their overall sense of excitement about, and engagement with, the learning process. If students enjoy something then they are more likely to engage in deep learning and to perform to their potential. Our findings suggest that blogging as a form of assessment might be a good strategy to implement as a way to enhance both student retention and NSS scores.

Inevitably, the introduction of a novel assessment strategy raises challenges for students who have to undertake something that is different to familiar assessment methods. This echoes the process that undergraduates go through when they arrive at university and have to develop an understanding of the 'ways of thinking and practising' (Hounsell and McCune 2005) in their disciplines. Our findings add to these debates by indicating the ways in which students learn how to engage with a novel assessment method in ways which were sometimes transformational for them. While blogging was not without its drawbacks, centring particularly on technical issues, the students became active agents of their own learning by turning these difficulties into learning moments. This is an important contribution to debates which seek to better understand how students become successful learners as

well as to questions about how to design assessments which involve them in the learning process (Serafini 2000).

Conclusions

Much of the focus on student engagement has been on curriculum design and on the role of assessment strategies in fostering more engaged students. This has resulted in a great deal of work on how to promote student engagement. Our research has shown the kinds of engagement that are fostered through the use of blogging as an assessment method. What emerges from the analysis is that students found blogging a creative process that engaged them in their studies in ways that were very different from their engagement with conventional assessment methods. We showed how the structure of blogging, which relied on students making a series of entries over the duration of their course, was an important way in which students became engaged. The continuous nature of the process was instrumental in providing them with the opportunity to engage more often, more deeply and with a greater range of the course materials (see also Holmes 2015). Further, students were able to personalise their blogs, such that the process promoted opportunities for a more individualised learning experience. While students struggled initially with blogging, they actively turned this to their advantage such that blogging presented them with a series of learning moments which further enhanced their engagement with the course.

The continued development of the students' blogging skills is an important addition to debates about student engagement that often begin from a range of institutional practices and student behaviours linked to student satisfaction and achievement (Kahn 2013). Through the process of blogging the students developed new ways of thinking and practising in an authentic and meaningful fashion. They developed these new skills by two methods: first by engaging in a learning process that was genuinely creative and liberating; and secondly by participating in an assessment method that forced them to reflect upon the course content in a more engaged way. They questioned knowledge more critically, both in the blog posts and more widely in their conversations with peers.

Our findings indicate that students actively want to engage with new forms of assessment practices that they see as less restrictive than essays and written examinations, and that these are important ways to enhance student engagement. It is not difficult to understand why. As Trowler (2010 pp.2) indicates, 'a sound body of literature has established robust correlations between student involvement in a subset of "educationally purposive activities", and positive outcomes of student success and development, including satisfaction, persistence, academic achievement and social engagement' (see also Kuh et al., 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

With the pre-eminence of the neo-liberal university, and the quantification of both learning metrics and learning journeys, there has been a call for learning to become more personalised to the needs of the individual students. There is a clear remit for assessment strategies to be more closely allied to the personal development of students, as well as to their expectation that learning will be more tailored to their circumstances. Our findings indicate that blogging is an excellent example of such an initiative given that it (usually) requires students to write in a reflective and engaging manner that begins from their own experiences and understandings of the topic in hand. This fosters creativity and allows students to personalise their learning, both of which are highly desirable at a time when higher education can make students feel like they are insignificant players in a massified system.

References

Almarghani, E. and I. Mijatovic. 2017. "Factors affecting student engagement in HEIs – it is all about good teaching." *Teaching in Higher Education* 22(8): 940-956.

Biggs, J. B. and C. Tang. 2011. *Teaching For Quality Learning At University* (Fourth Edition). Maidenhead: Open University Press, McGraw-Hill Education.

Boud, D. and N. Falchikov. 2007. "Aligning assessment with long term learning." *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 31(4): 399-413.

Bovill, C., C Bulley and K. Morss. 2011. "Engaging and empowering first year university students through curriculum design: perspectives from the literature." *Teaching in Higher Education* 16(2): 197-209.

Brady, A.M. 2005. "Assessment of learning with multiple-choice questions." *Nurse Education in Practice* 5(4): 238-242.

Braun, V. and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using thematic analysis in psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (1): 77-101.

Carless, D. 2006. "Differing perceptions in the feedback process." *Studies in Higher Education* 31(2): 219-233.

Carless, D. 2015. "Exploring learning-oriented assessment processes." *Higher Education* 69(6): 63–976.

Cook, I. 2000. "Nothing can ever be the case of 'Us' and 'Them' again: exploring the politics of difference through border pedagogy and student journal writing." *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 24(1): 13-27.

Everett, M. 2015. "Fostering first year students' engagement and well-being through visual narrative." *Studies in Higher Education* 42(4): 623-635

Falchikov, N. 2005. *Improving Assessment Through Student Involvement: Practical solutions for aiding learning in higher and further education*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Forrest, K., K. Judd and J. Davison. 2012. "Coming to know within 'healthy uncertainty': an autoethnography of engagement and transformation in undergraduate education." *Teaching in Higher Education* 17(6): 710-721.

Foster, E.J., J. McNeil and S. Lawther. 2012. "Exploring new students' conceptions of engagement and feedback." In *Improving Student Engagement and Development Through Assessment: theory and practice in higher education*, edited by L. Clouder, C. Brougham, S. Jewell and G. Steventon, 32-44. London: Routledge.

Gibjels, D. and F. Dochy. 2006. "Students' assessment preferences and approached to learning: can formative assessment make a difference?" *Journal of Educational Studies* 32(4): 399-409.

Gourlay, L. 2015. "Student engagement and the 'tyranny of participation.'" *Teaching in Higher Education* 20(4): 402-411.

Hansen, H. E. 2016. "The impact of blog-style writing on student learning outcomes: A pilot study." *Journal of Political Science Education* 12(1): 85-101.

Herrington, A. and J. Herrington. 2006. Eds. *Authentic Learning Environments in Higher Education*. London: Information Science Publishing.

Holmes, N. 2018. "Engaging with assessment: increasing student engagement through continuous assessment." *Active Learning in Higher Education* doi.org/10.1177/1469787417723230

Holmes, N. 2015. "Student perceptions of their learning and engagement in response to the use of a continuous e-assessment in an undergraduate module." *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 40(1): 1-14.

Jordan, S. 2009. "Assessment for learning: pushing the boundaries of computer-based assessment." *Practitioner Research in Higher Education* 3(1): 11-19.

Kahn, P. 2013. "Theorising student engagement in higher education." *British Educational Research Journal* 40(6): 1005-1018.

Kidwell, J., Northcott, M. and Paterson, J. 2012. "Enhancing student learning through the use of blogs." In *Proceedings of the Seventh International Blended Learning Conference* 7. pp. 82, Seventh International Blended Learning Conference, Hertfordshire, United Kingdom, 13-14 June.

Klemencic, M. 2017. "From student engagement to student agency: conceptual considerations of European policies on student-centred learning in higher education." *Higher Education Policy* 30(1): 69-85.

Kuh, G. 2009. "The National Survey of Student Engagement: conceptual and empirical foundations." *New Directions for institutional Research* 2(1): 5-20.

Kuh, G., J. Kinzie, J. Buckley, B. Bridges, and J. Hayek. 2007. *Piecing Together the Student Success Puzzle: Research, propositions and recommendations*. ASHE Higher Education Report 32(5) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Leung, S. E. Mok and D. Wong. 2008. "The impact of assessment methods on the learning of nursing students." *Nurse Education Today* 28(6): 711-719.

Nicol, D. and D. Macfarlane-Dick, 2006. "Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice." *Studies in Higher Education* 31(2): 199-218.

Ni Raghallaigh, M. and R. Cunliffe. 2013. "Creating a safe climate for active learning and student engagement: an example from an introductory social work module." *Teaching in Higher Education* 18(1): 93-105.

Park, C. 2003. "Engaging students in the learning process: the learning journal." *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 27(2): 183–199.

Pascarella, E. and P. Terenzini. 2005. *How College Affects Students: A third decade of research*. Wiley
Price, M., K. Handley, and J. Millar. 2011. "Feedback: focusing attention on engagement." *Studies in Higher Education* 36(8): 879-896.

Purcel, B. K. and H. Xie. 2014. "Patterns and pedagogy: Exploring student blog use in Higher Education." *Contemporary Educational Technology* 5(2): 96-109.

Robothom, D. and C. Julian. 2006. "Stress and the higher education student: a critical review of the literature. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 30(2): 107-117.

Rust, C. 2002. "The impact of assessment on student learning: how can the research literature practically help to inform the development of department assessment strategies and learner-centred assessment practices?" *Active Learning in Higher Education* 3(2): 145-158.

Rust, C., O'Donovan, B and M. Price. 2003. "A social constructivist assessment process model: how the research literature shows us this could be best practice." *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 30(3): 231-240.

Samball, K., McDowell, L. and C. Montgomery. 2012. Eds. *Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*. London: Routledge

Serafini, F. 2000. "Three paradigms of assessment: measurement, procedure and inquiry." *The Reading Teacher* 54(4): 384-393.

Shields, S. 2015. "'My work is bleeding': exploring students' emotional responses to first year feedback." *Teaching in Higher Education* 20(6): 614-624.

Smith, R. A. 2010. "To blog or not to blog? Using blogs in assessment". Available at: <http://pops.uclan.ac.uk/index.php/ujpr/article/viewFile/106/46>.

Taras, M. 2008. "Summative and formative assessment: perceptions and realities." *Active Learning in Higher Education* 9(2): 172-192

Trigwell, K., R. Ellis and F. Han. 2012. "Relations between students' approaches to learning, experienced emotions and outcomes of learning." *Studies in Higher Education* 37(7): 811-824

Trowler, V. 2010. *Student Engagement Literature Review*. Higher Education Academy <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/student-engagement-literature-review>

Trowler, P. and Cooper, A. 2002. "Teaching and learning regimes: implicit theories and recurrent practices in the enhancement of teaching and learning through educational development programmes." *Higher Education Research and Development* 21(3): 221-240.

Trowler, P. 2008. *Cultures and Change in Higher Education: Theories and Practices*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Yang, Z.H. 2009. "Using blogs to enhance critical reflection and community of practice." *Educational Technology and Society* 12(2): 11-21.

Zepke, N and L. Leach. 2010. "Improving student engagement: ten proposals for action." *Active Learning in Higher Education* 11(3): 167-177.